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Comments on Dr. Mayumo Inoue's "Stones, Rocks, and Other Objects of History: Aesthetic Distributions of Memories in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Kiyota Masanobu"

Lee Yu-cheng

Academia Sinica

I attended two conferences in early and late June, respectively. The early June conference was an international workshop on "Asian American Studies in Asia" held in Taipei and sponsored by the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, my home institution. In his welcoming remarks, Prof. Te-hsing Shan, Director of the Institute, himself a senior Asian Americanist, maps out three intersecting areas which the international workshop proposes to explore: "The question of Asian American visibility in Asia, the institutional mediations of Asian American literary and cultural studies in Asia, and the imagination of the Asian American critical project in relation to local contexts in Asia." Although the land mass charted here is Asia, the proposed areas of exploration can be seen, in general, as a response to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's famous question about internationalization of Asian American literary studies: "What happens when Asian American literature leaves 'home'?"

The late June conference was on black studies, which was held in Naha and co-hosted by the Japan Black Studies Association and the Okinawa International University. The theme of the conference was, significantly, "Okinawa and Japan/World: Perspectives from Black Studies." This was a timely and relevant topic. Only one month before, in May, the U.S.-Japan Consultative Committee had confirmed that the two governments had agreed to build a 1,800-meter long runway at Henoko (辺野古) on Okinawa as a "replacement facility" for the Futenma (普天間) Air Station, and to partially relocate military training to Tokunoshima Island (徳之島). Meanwhile, Prime Minister Yokio Hatoyama was forced to step down, one of the reasons for his resignation being, according to some news commentators in Taiwan, his failure to keep campaign promises to relocate U.S. military bases to places outside Okinawa. Although Okinawa accounts only 0.6% of Japanese territory, it hosts nearly 75% of all U.S. military bases in Japan, and at least one-fifth of the land surface of the main island of Okinawa is still occupied by U.S. forces four decades after Okinawa's reversion to Japan or five decades after the adoption of the Ampo treaty.

In my short dinner speech, I briefly outlined how black studies challenged and trespassed the well-policed borders of traditional academic disciplines,

successfully combining pedagogical practice and social-political intervention. I noted that black studies began to take shape in the United States in the 1960s, during the days of the anti-Vietnam War protests, growing middle class resistance to the draft, the ongoing Civil Rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and so on. In the world of academia and intellectualism, the burgeoning field of black studies was where all the forces of resistance and change converged. Black studies must therefore be recognized as a response to, in the words of Houston A. Baker, Jr., "both American imperialism abroad and the vicious American reactions to black demands for civil rights at home" (Baker 11). In my speech, I then made an analogy between Okinawa studies and black studies and concluded by asking a few questions: "How does Okinawa studies reinvent itself in order to meet the demands and challenges of ongoing changes? What and how could Okinawa studies learn from black studies? Most importantly, what and how could the people of Okinawa learn from the success stories of Black America in their struggles for liberation?" These questions were raised with Okinawa's colonial situation in mind. As Nomura Koya, a sociologist from Hiroshima Shudo University, points out, "It is not simply the presence of the bases on their soil that Okinawans resent but also the de facto colonial rule of the U.S. military. The Vietnam War prompted Okinawans to ask particularly penetrating questions regarding the complicity with U.S. colonialism implied by their condoning of the bases. And that questioning has only intensified with the Gulf War and the subsequent bombing of Iraq. Seen in this light, rejection of the bases becomes rejection of both colonialism and collusion with colonialism" (Koya 118).

I mention these conferences because they are related to Dr. Mayumo Inoue's paper. Let me digress here to say a few words about the major concern of my generation of Asian Americanists working in East Asia. I am referring to esteemed scholars and colleagues such as Prof. Teruyo Oeki of Japan, Prof. Kun Jong Lee of Korea, and Prof. Te-hsing Shan of Taiwan, to mention only a very few names. Many of us were, and still are, concerned with what Otto Bauer has called "peoples without a history" (qtd. in Arendt 271), or with the "'unhistorical' strata" of a population, in Hannah Arendt's words (Arendt 271). Like many other minorities in the United States, Asian Americans were once "peoples without a history," suffering from institutional racism and social-political inequalities, and being denied cultural memories. When my generation of academics in East Asia came to be interested in Asian American studies, many of us shared a common agenda: to listen to the voices of Asian America. As regards the term "Asian America," sometimes we seem to be more interested in "Asian" than "America." The reason is obvious: as Asians, we believe that we are culturally, historically, and ethnically closer to Asian America. I recall that the themes of three conferences on Chinese American literature organized by my home institution prior to the abovementioned most recent international workshop were "cultural identity," "the politics of representation," and "invented tradition," respectively. Apparently, these conferences mirror our dominant concern with how Asian

American subjectivity can be configured and reconfigured. Although we find between Asia and Asian America what Edward W. Said has called filiation, this does not make us what Dr. Inoue refers to as "cultural nationalists."

Asian American studies, grown "out of a specific history of resistance and advocacy in the United States" (Wong 138), was a product of the identity politics of the 1960s and came to fruition during the heyday of what has since become known as the U.S. culture wars and canon debate. This was a period of great revisionism in critical discourse and literary pedagogy, a period of academic upheaval that spurred a wholesale inquiry into the institutions of literary studies and knowledge production. Suppressed texts were excavated, canonical works were reinterpreted, core curricula were reformed, and the predominant literary history was called into question. In short, this was a time marked clearly by what bell hooks calls "recognition of differences" (hooks 10). "Race," "class," "gender," "sexuality," and "ethnicity" were a few of the buzzwords that dominated literary and cultural discourses of the day. Indeed, this was a period when communities of readers and critics were encouraged to expand the previous academic discourse and intellectually explore the boundaries of acceptability.

This was also the period we saw the appearance of pioneering works in Asian American literary studies by Profs. Elaine Kim, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, King-Kok Cheung, Amy Ling and others. To put it in a nutshell, scholars and scholarship of this period denoted the profound importance of "claiming America," highlighting the crisis of representation and giving primacy to Asian America's desire for a cultural identity and national belonging. In other words, from the outset, Asian American studies had already posited the idea of a political project, one couched in the language of liberation and very much informed by cultural nationalism.

Writing in the mid-1990s, Prof. Sau-ling Wong, for example, somewhat skeptical about the transnational, deconstructivist turn in Asian American studies, raises questions "about the consequences of an uncritical participation in denationalization, as if it represented a more advanced and theoretically more sophisticated (in short, superior, though proponents rarely say so directly) stage in Asian American studies" (Wong 135). Prof. Wong regards this denationalizing process as "a developmental or maturational narrative about reconfigurations in Asian American cultural criticism" (Wong 135). In her emphasis on the importance of continuing to politicize and historicize Asian American studies, Prof. Wong insists on "claiming America." She contends that "if claiming America becomes a minor task for Asian American cultural criticism and espousal of denationalization becomes wholesale, certain segments of the Asian American population may be left without a viable discursive space" (Wong 137).

Interestingly, what has worried Prof. Wong about denationalization of Asian American studies is rearticulated in a similar vein by Dr. Inoue in his paper. According to Dr. Inoue, "as seen in the key texts of Asian American literary and cultural studies in the past 15 years, the critics' attempt to valorize critical vantage

points offered by those who have multiple allegiances, experienced multiple migrancies or displacements, and, mostly due to such experiences, acquired multilingual fluencies, not only fetishizes the diasporic groups' transnational aura but also posits their empirical experiences as the essentialist, quasi-transcendental ground of their exceptionalist claim to historical knowledge." Dr. Inoue problematizes these critics' "exceptionalist" framing of Asian Americanness, which becomes some kind of "rigid formulation" that "not only excludes others whose possible interest in and desire to participate in various forms of liberatory politics do not match their putative biographical or sociologically determinable attributes as such." He faults these critics for prioritizing and valorizing experimental forms, seen "as relatively transparent reflections of liminal, marginalized positionalities of Asian Americans in the transnational world," and accuses them of committing "something like essentialist formalism whereby the very forms, as markers of identities, not only interpellate the students but also limit the Asian Americanist conceptualization of solidarity with other oppressed groups in the US." This emphasis on conceptualizing solidarity with other oppressed groups in American society, significantly enough, echoes the trajectory of Asian American cultural politics envisioned by Asian Americanists across the years.

This is of course not to suggest that Dr. Inoue proposes a return to the cultural nationalist paradigm of Asian American studies. Rather, he sees in the new transnationalist paradigm an exclusive politics that "quarantines in advance characteristics that are deemed too distant from or not conducive to" the paradigm's political agenda, as exemplified by the work of Lisa Lowe. He refers to this, a la Judith Butler, as coalition politics that excludes differences. The keyword here is, of course, "differences"--and this is exactly what Dr. Inoue tries to celebrate throughout his paper.

Dr. Inoue then resorts to Gilles Deleuze's notion of "transcendental empiricism" and Walter Benjamin's concept of "historical origin" to clarify his own critical stance. Basically, I have no problem with the way these theoretical notions are deployed in the paper. The Deleuzean notion of "transcendental empiricism" is relevant to Dr. Inoue's theorization here because it reveals and celebrates "the contingency, dissimilarity and variety of each individual life" (Stagoll 283). Deleuze has later extended his notion to explore "the virtual presence of multiple temporalities and historical experiences" in cinematic images. Benjamin's notion of "historical origin," on the other hand, signifies "something imperfect and incomplete" lurked in the process of historical restoration or reestablishment, hence the importance of "the presence of other, similarly incomplete witnesses of history." With both Deleuzean and Benjaminian notions in mind, Dr. Inoue goes one step further to disclose the inherent danger of recent attempts in Asian American studies to monopolize historical memory. This may explain why Asian American critics, who espouse the "seemingly open and inclusive vision of politics of difference," turn out to have practiced a kind of

coalition politics that excludes differences.

To elaborate his points, Dr. Inoue then reads Asian American writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* and Okinawan poet Kiyota Masanobu's poems and essays to examine "their interrogation of the possibility of producing the very phenomenal conditions for historical memories and of disseminating them sensuously to multiple recipients across and outside the US and East Asia." I shall not repeat what Dr. Inoue has said in his interpretations of Theresa Cha and Kiyota Masanobu. In general, he finds disfavor with various Asian American critics' readings of *Dictee,* which he says overlook "the presence of multiple and oftentimes anonymous women who renarrate history through its differentiation." Furthermore, in his reading of a number of Kiyota's works, Dr. Inoue sees the poet's "intense desire to critique imperialism outside of any cultural nationalist foundationalism." He points out that Kiyota urges "those who wish to remember colonial and imperial histories to not only assemble, differentiate, and distribute the 'minutest details' of historical objects but also to become such objects themselves."

Dr. Inoue is consistent in his theoretical grounding and his critical readings of various postcolonial texts. His readings and theorization are helpful in revealing some of the pitfalls that are inherent in the recent Asian American critical turn that privileges transnationlism and Asian historical memories. To echo Dr. Inoue's postulation about historical memories in the title of his paper, let me wrap up my comments with a reference to Walter Benjamin. In early 1932, Benjamin set down his recollections of his childhood and adolescent years in Berlin in a long essay called "A Berlin Chronicle." In an aphoristic tone he compares the act of recollection to digging:

> He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is merely a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination of what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand--like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery--in the sober rooms of our later insights. (Benjamin 611)

To excavate any historical memories, one has to toil like a Benjaminian digger, turning the buried past over "as one turns over soil." The "images" that one discovers, those "precious fragments and torsos," will then stand well to inspire one's "later insights." In my recent trip to Okinawa, especially during my visit to the Himeyuri Monument and the Peace Memorial Park, I was strongly struck by the "fragments and torsos" of war memories. War knows no victors. I believe no one can forever monopolize historical memories, and I think I understand what Dr. Inoue has endeavored to put forth in his paper.

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